The Explanatory Power of 'Dilemmas'

‘Die Formulierung einer Frage ist ihre Lösung’
– Karl Marx, 1919[1]

Political upheavals continue to disrupt not only established institutions and organisations, but raise a fundamental challenge to political scientists’ capacities to understand and explain political change. Recent changes in British politics, including the organisational make-up and ideological direction of political parties, outcomes of recent general elections, and the referendum to leave the European Union, for example, indicate that questions about how we conceive of political change matters. These questions may revolve around the process of change (revolutionary, evolutionary, punctuated equilibrium, etc.) and the causes of change (critical junctures, anomalies, exogenous shocks, material interests, windows of opportunity, the role of power, etc.), within and across institutional boundaries.

The continuing growth of interpretive approaches to political science (what Gofas and Hay (2010) term the ‘ideational turn’) gives us an opportunity to further understand change from different theoretical perspectives. Interpretive approaches call on social scientists to take actors’ ideas and beliefs seriously as part of explanatory political analysis (Bevir and Rhodes, 2016). These approaches shift focus directly to actors’ interpretations, attitudes, beliefs and everyday behaviours. With respect to political change, this implies a focus on how actors make sense of their place in situations, institutions or broader constellations of ideational frameworks and how those beliefs not only shape action but can and do change behaviour (within, as part of, or beyond institutions). Though there exist many varieties of interpretive analysis, a key reference point in UK political science and beyond is the theoretically-informed empirical research undertaken by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2010, 2016). Since the publication of their seminal study, *Interpreting British Governance* (2003), their approach has made an important and distinctive contribution to debates about not only British governance but also, and more widely, to debates about how we approach and study political phenomena (e.g. Finlayson *et. al.*, 2004; Glynos and Howarth, 2008; Marsh and Hall, 2016).

Bevir and Rhodes have consistently engaged with debates on interpretive theory and how it can be taken forward. In doing so, their approach has developed over time (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2008a, 2008b, 2012). The continuing relevance of their approach can be seen

[1] Author’s translation: ‘The formulation of a question is its solution’ (Marx, 1919 [1844], p.9).

in the wide range of settings it has been applied, including: community leadership (Sullivan, 2007); crisis management (Wilkinson, 2011); bureaucratic elites (Gains, 2009); and parliamentary practices (Author, forthcoming). However, and despite the growing importance of their work (as seen with the growth of edited collections on their approach: Bevir and Rhodes, 2016; Turnbull, 2016), we still understand little about how the interpretive approach can help to explain change. This may be an odd statement given that Bevir and Rhodes have long focused on how traditions have clashed in order to explain conflict and modification of political practices over time. Moreover, they have identified a concept – 'dilemmas' – as a way to explain those shifting practices. In short, they argue that political actors amend their beliefs, and therefore their actions, practices and wider webs of belief, in response to problems or questions that actors face. However, detailed theoretical explication or its empirical application has been neglected. And with it, a chance is missed to use the concept of 'dilemmas' as analytical hook to develop a deeper and more substantial understanding around political change within and beyond institutions, organisations, and practices.

Bevir and Rhodes' limited application of dilemmas has a number of repercussions. First, it limits the dynamism of their approach (Hay, 2011: p.178; Wagenaar, 2011: p.4). Without a detailed explication of dilemmas, the heart of interpretive political science is removed in the sense that there is no *clash* or *contest* of ideas. This is important because, if we define politics as the process of contestation between different world views, then Bevir and Rhodes unintentionally elide a fundamental element of politics (Finlayson, 2007: pp.549-52). Second, without an adequate explanation of why things change or why things stay the same, the explanatory value of other concepts has been questioned, including that of tradition (Hay in Finlayson *et. al.*, 2004: pp.144-7; Glynos and Howarth, 2008) and narratives (Finlayson *et. al.*, 2004: pp.152-3). This therefore raises a challenge over the explanatory value of Bevir and Rhodes' conceptual framework. Third, and relatedly, there is a wider debate about the explanatory power of interpretive approaches. This has been subject to considerable discussion (e.g. see Keith Dowding's *The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science*, and symposium on this in *Political Studies Review* (vol.15, issue 2)). While Bevir and Rhodes have defended the explanatory power of interpretive approaches (e.g. 2006, pp.19-21), questions remain.

Given these issues (discussed at more length in the substantive sections of this article), a more developed understanding of how dilemmas shape politics offers an important

intervention. It would address all three issues relating to the politics of clashing beliefs, the coherence of the conceptual framework, and the explanatory power of the approach. That is the purpose of this article, and to do so, I have split my argument into three sections. First, I review the application of the concept in Bevir and Rhodes' work, showing that, while dilemmas are mentioned throughout their empirical research, the concept is not central to their analysis. This highlights two core weaknesses: ambiguity surrounding the process of change (i.e. actions and practices conducive to change) and a lack of appreciation for the strategic context in which dilemmas take place (i.e. power relations). In the second section, I address those concerns to develop a more robust articulation of the concept. In this section, dilemmas are linked to everyday practices and to power relations by drawing on the concept of 'problematisation'. I argue that dilemmas arise out of conflicting practices and are framed by a strategic context, both of which mean that dilemmas are not open-ended and indeterminate but resolved precisely depending on how they arise. The article closes in a third, brief section to show why dilemmas matter in understanding political change, and highlights dilemmas as fundamental to carry out explanatory research within an interpretive conceptual framework.

The consequences of a detailed articulation of dilemmas are profound for the interpretive approach. It not only provokes a debate about how we can understand and explain change in Bevir and Rhodes' work, but enables interpretive scholars to take the approach forward by addressing some of the concerns noted above. It allows scholars to take dilemmas as a core concept through which to explain political upheavals and how political actors respond to those upheavals. In highlighting the importance of dilemmas, it affects other concepts in Bevir and Rhodes' toolkit, too, by adding depth to how we explain the persistence and modification of traditions, practices and beliefs. In this way, this article opens new, rich opportunities to apply dilemmas and explain change.

1. The interpretive approach

The interpretive approach to political science offers a philosophical outlook on the world from ontological and epistemological principles; it is not a set of methodological techniques. It has been discussed and debated in a number of books and journals (including this journal) (e.g. Finlayson *et. al.*, 2004; Glynos and Howarth, 2008; Marsh and Hall, 2016). The basic premise of the approach comes from an anti-foundationalist

philosophy, which presumes that there is no foundation or essence to social reality (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010: p.42). In other words, political actors do not have pure, unmediated or objective access to the world; instead, they must construct their reality through engagement with the world, and their beliefs about it. This basic philosophical approach has significant implications for the study of politics:

> We can understand and explain practices and actions adequately only by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors. Hence to study political life adequately we have to engage in the interpretation of the beliefs and desires of those we study (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: p.18).

This means that we must take seriously individuals' interpretations of the world – including their beliefs, values, interests and passions – in order to explain their behaviour. Individuals do not have given interests, as rational choice theorists (for example) assume; they are constructed, learned, shared, debated.

A further implication from the above is that individuals are not autonomous from their social contexts in order to understand the world around them. Bevir and Rhodes (2010: p.74) emphasise the importance of 'situated agency':

> To accept agency is to imply people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can transform the social background. So, agency is possible, but it is always situated in a particular context.

By context, the authors use the concept of 'traditions'. These are made up of a multitude of individual beliefs, held by actors, also known as 'webs of belief'. Other concepts that flow from their approach are summarised in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Interpretive approaches – not limited to Bevir and Rhodes – have made significant contributions across the human sciences. This has not been without debate, however, especially regarding the explanatory power of interpretive scholarship. For some, interpretive analysis can only help us to *understand* political action and practice but not *explain* them (e.g. Hay in Finlayson *et. al.*, 2004). This is, arguably, a misconception because the dichotomy between understanding and explanation is a false one. As Bevir and Rhodes (2006: p.20) point out: '[t]o understand the relevant beliefs is to explain the action or practice'. This is because any meaningful explanation of actions or practices must

refer to the beliefs and desires that cause them. Causation, here, is taken broadly to mean pertinent connections between entities or events. This is not uncontroversial, but flows from interpretive philosophical principles that rejects positivist principles of causation as law-like generalisations associated with the natural sciences. Instead, causation in interpretive analysis depends on conditional connections (i.e. how different beliefs relate to one another) and volitional connections (i.e. how different beliefs lead to actions) (Bevir, 1999, 2000; Davidson, 1980).[2] For Bevir and Rhodes (2016: pp.16-7), the concepts of narrative, tradition and dilemma are explanatory concepts in that they demonstrate how collections of beliefs relate to one another and lead to certain behaviour. What does this mean for explaining political change? For this, our discussion turns to 'dilemmas'.

1.1. Interpreting the concept of dilemmas

To explain change, Bevir and Rhodes rely on the concept of 'dilemmas'. It is rooted in Mark Bevir's *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, in which he argues that (1999: pp.221-2):

> People develop, adjust, and transform traditions in response to dilemmas, where dilemmas are authoritative understandings that put into question their existing webs of belief. Dilemmas prompt changes of belief because they consist of new beliefs and any new belief necessarily poses a question of the agent's webs of belief.

This quote encapsulates the basic way in which a dilemma works, both in Mark Bevir's post-analytic philosophy and empirical work. A dilemma comes about through a tension between two or more beliefs but, crucially, it depends on an actor interpreting two (or more) beliefs in this way (making it different from the Kuhnian concept of anomalies, for example (Bevir, 1999: pp.229-30)). Without interpreting two beliefs as posing questions for each other, they may co-exist in contradictory harmony. However, and once an actor finds two beliefs in conflict, a 'dilemma' arises. In this case, the actor needs to adjudicate between those beliefs. They are resolved creatively by actors in different ways. New beliefs could: (i) be discarded as unconvincing, (ii) be accommodated within a web of beliefs, or (iii) replace an older belief. This could then lead to ripple effects because it could now come into conflict with other beliefs within a wider web. This is how – incrementally, slowly and painfully – traditions and practices change over time. Alternatively, the introduction of a single new belief could have such substantive effects that the coherence of whole traditions is ripped apart. Dilemmas are fluid, indeterminate and usually creative responses to

[2] There is an important and ongoing debate about this that goes beyond the purview of this article. For example, see the symposium on Dowding's (2016) recent book in *Political Studies Review* (vol. 15, issue 2).

beliefs in conflict. Importantly, there is always agency involved: change happens only after actors interpret beliefs, practices or traditions in conflict with one another. This also means that dilemmas can come from anywhere: reading a book, personal moral reflection, meeting with other people, contrasting experiences of the world, empirical evidence and/or statistics, unintended consequences, shock events, a *faux pas*, natural and/or artificial disasters, and many more beside (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006: pp.9-11). Ultimately, this list is endless because any type of experience and any type of belief can be an authoritative question to an established web of beliefs.

1.2. The concept in practice

Examples of dilemmas are not difficult to find. In Bevir's theoretical work (1999: pp.221-64), examples are often used in relation to scientific discoveries and how these challenged religious beliefs. In their empirical work, Bevir and Rhodes cite numerous political examples. In their 2003 book, for instance, the authors discuss how different political traditions responded to the 'dilemma' of Thatcherism. In particular, they explore how the Labour Party accepted the ideas of controlling inflation as a policy goal and accepted the existence of an 'underclass'. In doing so, the Labour Party accommodated new beliefs into a socialist tradition that became known as 'the third way'. Elsewhere, in *Governance Stories* (2006), the authors go into detail about how the National Health Service (NHS) has been reformed between 1948 and 2001 as a result of a range of unresolved tensions over universalism versus selectivity in providing healthcare, and around different interpretations of the concept of autonomy. Meanwhile, in *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010), Bevir and Rhodes explore how the fragmentation of governance reforms of the 1980s created dilemmas of coordination for ministers and civil servants. And finally, in Rhodes' *Everyday Life in British Government* (2011: pp.244-79), there is one clear diachronic analysis of a dilemma as it unfolds, namely the resignation of Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education, in 2002 (Rhodes, 2011: pp.244-79). This narrative is one in which a dilemma emerges and develops, with competing interpretations to unfolding events. It is a good example of how a dilemma unfolds, and about how an initial 'crisis' about school examination standards turned into one about the politician's leadership qualities.

These examples of how dilemmas have been applied are important and telling about change as understood through an interpretive perspective. In particular, what becomes

clear from these examples is that the concept is applied in such a way as to link one belief or set of beliefs to another. The concept thereby provides a pivotal link between two beliefs or webs of belief. However, the explanatory account or *process of change* is left open and unexplained. In particular, the question that remains in all examples cited above is an explanatory one: *why* did the above-cited changes occur? With respect to the Labour Party, for example, why did it respond to specific beliefs about inflation and social class, but not to other aspects of communitarian values? With respect to NHS reforms, why did competition and financial prudence come to be seen as the best ways forward for the NHS? Only in Rhodes' narrative account of Estelle Morris do we begin to understand the process of an unfolding dilemma – but even here, it is often implied.

In analysing how dilemmas are applied, it suggests that the concept is not actually central to analysis; instead, the authors focus on discussing conflicting beliefs and traditions in parallel and use dilemmas as a descriptive link. The focus of their analysis is not, therefore, on the way that dilemmas are framed or adjudicated, but on summarising the beliefs that actors hold at different times. For example, in *Interpreting British Governance*, the authors merely assert that some policies from the New Right were accommodated within Labour Party policy, which led to the 'third way', without explaining what clash of beliefs or practices or traditions led to such changes. Elsewhere, in *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010: 136-55), the authors summarise different narratives of governance as a response to dilemmas of policy fragmentation without examining the interaction of different beliefs. In sum, when dilemmas are used in Bevir and Rhodes' empirical work, they are 'used to refer to little more than the simple juxtaposition, combination and recombination of ideas and insights' (Hay, 2011: pp.178-9). This has crucial repercussions because it elides something that is normally considered to be an intrinsic part of politics: the *contest* or *clash* of ideas. Although politics can be defined in multiple ways, conflict is an inherent part of politics (Mouffe, 2005; Finlayson, 2007). Battles of ideas are about how society should be ordered and what is deemed 'natural' or 'normal' in the name of a world view (or web of beliefs). So, these conflicts are attempts to structure social reality and therefore about how social relations, public and private resources, and power should be distributed. This conflict is ineradicable, yet it is not central in Bevir and Rhodes' analyses. In this sense, Bevir and Rhodes unintentionally take politics out of interpretive political science. This is a topic to which I return in the third section.

Because Bevir and Rhodes do not examine how beliefs, practices or traditions interact, other scholars have critiqued the explanatory value of interpretive concepts (e.g. Glynos and Howarth, 2008; Smith, 2008). Sometimes, this has been done with direct reference to explaining change and continuity. For example, Paul Fawcett (2016: pp.41-2, emphasis added), in summarising the role of traditions, notes:

> [D]ecentered theory can play an important role by highlighting the value of interpretation in political analysis, particularly how traditions establish a discursive path dependency that helps to shape but not determine policy outcomes. Thus, whilst I would argue that we need to acknowledge that traditions can, and do, change, *this needs to be combined with an understanding of how that change takes place within a strategic context that enables and constrains certain types of change over others*.

Fawcett makes no mention of the concept of dilemma – even though this is the precisely role assigned to that concept in the interpretive armoury. Elsewhere, Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2008: p.161) ask: 'why might some aspects of traditions exert greater appeal than others, or why might some aspects resist modification?'. This question was posed with reference to a debate over the role of power in the interpretive framework. However, and once again, this is where the concept of dilemma should come in. These critiques imply that there needs to be greater appreciation of how beliefs and traditions change (or persist). We can do so by strengthening the concept of dilemmas through a more detailed examination of how the process of change occurs (i.e. how beliefs and actions are affected) and the role that power might play in it. Doing so would therefore have big implications for the explanatory appeal of interpretive political science, and emphasise the connections between different concepts in Bevir and Rhodes' framework. This is the focus of the next section.

2. Theorising dilemmas

To overcome the criticisms above, scholars have turned to various other concepts or ideas: some have focused directly on the concept of power (Diamond *et. al.*, 2016; Smith, 2008); some on rhetoric as a way to explain the contest of ideas (Finlayson, 2007); and others on 'extra-discursive' issues such as governance failures and other 'institutional pathologies' (Hay, 2011). However, it is not necessary to go beyond Bevir and Rhodes' approach, but rather worth engaging more directly with other theoretical reference points within the interpretive tradition (broadly conceived) to strengthen their framework. Specifically, we

can bring dilemmas into conversation with a range of other scholars that have taken similar ideas, such as 'problems' and 'questions', as a starting point. There are arguably too many to mention, both from across philosophy (Meyer, 1995; Turnbull, 2014; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994) and empirical social and political sciences (Colebatch *et. al.* 2010; Gusfield, 1981; Hoppe, 2010; Lasswell, 1970). From such a broad range, we can argue – loosely – that 'problems' offer a framework through which political issues are discussed, disseminated and adjudicated. This is therefore fertile ground for further theoretical engagement and a setting in which we can place 'dilemmas', too.

In particular, I propose to supplement Bevir's dilemmas with the concept of 'problematisation' as developed by Michel Foucault. Bevir has been influenced in multiple ways by Foucault's work and, though he ultimately came to reject his approach (Bevir, 2000, 2011), rummaging through Foucault's 'toolbox' of concepts and ideas can still provide further insights. Specifically, we can better understand dilemmas by focusing on everyday practices and power relations, something to which problematisations are closely linked. To make this argument, I summarise the concept of problematisation, and then discuss it with reference to dilemmas in two themes: practices and power.

2.1. Problematisations

Problematisations were essential for Foucault. He explains this with reference to his works on madness and the prison (Foucault, 1988a: p.257):

> The notion common to all the work that I have done since *Histoire de la folie* [*Madness and Civilization*] is that of problematization, though it must be said that I never isolated this notion sufficiently. [...] In *Histoire de la folie* the question was how and why, at a given moment, madness was problematized through a certain institutional practice and a certain apparatus of knowledge. Similarly, in *Surveiller et punir* [*Discipline and Punish*], I was trying to analyse the changes in the problematization of the relations between crime and punishment through penal practices and penitentiary institutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

So, what is a problematisation? As Foucault concedes, he did not develop the concept, though there are hints in various texts and interviews, which some scholars have since attempted to bring together (e.g. Bacchi, 2012; Koopman, 2013). Broadly speaking, problematisations are points or moments when 'regimes of truth' are put into question; when something is introduced 'into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought' (Foucault, 1988a: p.257). Problematisations are about posing a problem to

established practices and beliefs. This can be developed in two ways. First, problematisation can be used to describe Foucault's method and form of critique. In this way, a problematisation is used to write 'histories of the present'. For example, with respect to *Discipline and Punish* (1991 [1977]), Foucault (1988b: p.101) says: '[W]hat I wanted to write was a history book that would make the present situation comprehensible and, possibly, lead to action. [...] I wanted to make [the penitentiary situation] intelligible and, therefore, criticisable' (see also, Foucault, 2002a: pp.224-5). Seen in this way, problematisations can be linked to normative critique.

However, and in a second sense, problematisations more generally refer to the development of questions, or the 'transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which [...] diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response' by actors (Foucault, 2002c: p.118). For example, in *Madness and Civilization* (1989 [1967]), Foucault traces how medical practitioners put into question their current knowledge of 'madness' and regarded it as insufficient to deal with medical advances, leading doctors and scientists to treat it as 'mental illness'. In this sense, it would be possible to shift the boundaries of established truth regimes and, by extension, everyday practices. The aim of a problematisation is to show, in the case of not only madness but also sexuality and crime and punishment, that these are not fixed essences despite their appearance as 'altogether natural, self-evident, and indispensable' (Foucault, 2002a: p.225). It is to make visible this false self-evidence and to demonstrate the precariousness of these objects as historically contingent. This feeds into a wider and well-established theme of Foucault's work to look at how true and false were divided up in any given 'regime of truth'. Indeed, his history of thought is:

> the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and 'silent', out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviour, habits, practices, and institutions (Foucault, 2001: p.74).

Seen in this second way, problematisations are not necessarily about critique (though often interwoven); it is broadly about how something became a problem and an object of thought.

Problematisations offer a clear resonance to the work of Bevir, specifically with the concept dilemmas. Both (dilemmas and problematisations) have a similar starting point,

in which they question the certainty and stability of a belief, practice or even tradition. It is a process in which actors begin to doubt their familiar routines or habits, and they begin to identify problems or difficulties of some kind with their established beliefs or world views. However, while Bevir and Rhodes keep their definition of dilemmas fairly loose, the concept of problematisation has been more clearly developed in tandem with everyday practices and linked to power relations. These are explored in the next two sections.

2.2. Practices

Methodologically, Foucault focused on 'practical texts' to demonstrate change. With regard to his work on prisons, Foucault (2002a: p.225 (emphasis original)) notes that:

> [T]he target of analysis wasn't "institutions", "theories", or "ideology" but *practices* – with the aim of grasping the conditions that make these acceptable at a given moment; the hypothesis being that these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances – whatever role these elements may actually play – but, up to a point, possess their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence, and "reason". It is a question of analysing a "regime of practices" – practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted meet and interconnect.

This quote crystallises the methodological and analytical focus of Foucault's work. It also gives us greater insight into problematisations in that they emerge and play out through practices. In posing questions and problems, by facing obstacles and dilemmas, 'regimes of practices' change:

> If prisons and punitive mechanisms are transformed, it won't be because a plan of reform has found its way into the heads of the social workers; it will be when those who have a stake in that reality, all those people, have come into collision with each other and with themselves, run into *dead ends, problems, and impossibilities, been through conflicts and confrontations* – when critique has been played out in the real, not when reformers have realized their ideas (Foucault, 2002a: p. 236 (emphasis added)).

The crucial point for our purposes is that Foucault centralises the importance of everyday life ('those who have a stake in that reality') with practices and dilemmas. Social order is sustained through these practices to form a 'regime of truth'. It sustains particular views of social spaces and relationships between people, explaining how society should be ordered by naturalising what are ultimately arbitrary relationships, processes and

practices. A problematisation destabilises that social order, questioning sedimented social practices and making explicit the contingent, provisional nature of everyday life.

Foucault's insights here are important, and suggest that the concept of dilemma must be closely linked to practices. In fact, his insights suggest that everyday practices should be at the heart of interpretive social inquiry. Bevir and Rhodes (2010: p.75) define practices as 'a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time'. While their definition has come under some critique (e.g. Wagenaar, 2012), it is sufficient to note here (for the purposes of this article) that, in accepting the importance of practices for social inquiry to resolve dilemmas, we must focus on those everyday practices in order to better understand the process of where and how dilemmas emerge, how they develop and how they play out. If we return to Bevir and Rhodes' dilemmas raised earlier, it suggests we need to look precisely at the 'practical texts' of Labour Party procedures, conventions and practices, or NHS and healthcare documents, to understand how beliefs and values changed. Dilemmas are not simply about juxtaposing collections of beliefs and assuming that beliefs change. Rather, an analysis that takes dilemmas as a focal point must explore how beliefs and traditions interact, play out and unfold through actions and practices. We do not necessarily need to go as far as Foucault by saying that practices 'possess their own specific regularities' (implying a loss of agency), but we must focus attention on everyday practices and, most importantly, the clash or contest of ideas, beliefs, traditions and narratives that those practices represent. This allows us to make connections between different webs of belief and helps us to explain how they change, which remains underexplored in Bevir and Rhodes' work. This requires an understanding of the mediating forces of these contests. For Foucault, this is where power is important.

2.3. Power

Dilemmas and problematisations ask particular questions about established boundaries of thought and practice. This in itself suggests that how a problem is raised, or in what way a question is asked, develops the very conditions within which possible responses can be given. As such, the formation of a dilemma limits what is perceived to be an acceptable, legitimate or even imaginable question to ask in any given context or ideational tradition. This is foundational to understanding the development of problematisations. It raises an immediate question about what forces mediate this contest or clash of ideas and suggests

a focus on power. This is something that Bevir and Rhodes acknowledge (2010: p.76) by explaining that power refers to the impact of traditions on individuals' beliefs and actions, and the restrictive consequences of the actions of others. This is, however, the extent of their discussion and, so, rather thin. It does not reveal anything about the processes involved for any of Bevir and Rhodes' analytical concepts, and least of all, dilemmas. Here, we can turn to the relationship between problematisations and power as drawn out in Foucault's work to supplement our understanding of how dilemmas unfold.

Foucault (1979: pp.92-3) argues that power is multidirectional and relational:

> [P]ower must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengths, or reverses them [...]. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.

As such, power is 'the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (p.93). These strategic situations are played out by individuals:

> [I]f we speak of the power of laws, institutions, and ideologies, if we speak of structures or mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. The term "power" designates relationships between "partners" (Foucault, 2002b: p.337).

So, when we talk of power, we talk of *power relations*. In defining power in this way, it suggests a focus on the operation and functioning of power (asking 'how does power operate?') rather than regarding power as a 'thing' or 'object', something that Foucault rejected. This also suggests a focus on the day-to-day operation or materiality of power. In other words, power relations and everyday practices are interwoven.

Power relations are played out through practices:

> [Power] is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probably or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions (Foucault, 2002b, p.341).

Practices and power are therefore inextricably linked. Power operates throughout society, and individuals are intentional and calculated about this; i.e., 'there is no power that is

exercised without a series of aims and objectives' (Foucault, 1979: p.95). However, this is also *localised* within specific power relations, which means that there is no comprehensive strategy or plan for the rationality of power across society. As Foucault put it more prosaically: 'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what "what they do" does' (quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: p.187). It suggests that the operation of power can be analysed by focusing on practices. This insight is hugely important because it suggests that power is a force that mediates a rupture of contesting beliefs, practices and traditions, and makes it a crucial element in explaining how dilemmas unfold. Power sharpens, blurs, strengthens, weakens, links or dissociates ideas and arguments together. As a result of power relations, some ideas and practices are prioritised, while others are marginalised or beyond political imagination. In this way, we can explain why some 'traditions' and 'webs of belief' – as Glynos and Howarth (2008) ask – exert persuasive appeal and resist modification. It is through a greater articulation of power that we can explain the 'stickiness' of traditions or practices. Individuals, groups and communities do not want to give up on their ideas and beliefs; they desperately cling on to their beliefs because it is this which ensures stability for their everyday lives and establishes meaning for their actions. To question is to threaten their views of reality. So, just as much as everyday practices and power relations have a constitutive role to play in allowing situated actors to make sense of their world, practices and power are therefore also essential in negotiating dilemmas. This helps to explain the 'stickiness' or flexibility of traditions. Returning once more to the examples of Labour Party policy changes, NHS reforms and governance practices, an explanatory account requires us to explore how webs of belief in these cases change as a result of power relations as played out through practices; i.e. how different actors within those institutions made sense of problems and what power relations existed to mediate ruptures taking place within webs of belief.

3. Implications: dilemmas in the political terrain

To revisit Bevir and Rhodes' original description, dilemmas are 'authoritative understandings that put into question' a situated actor's existing webs of belief. It depends on actors interpreting something as a dilemma – they are not outside interpretation. However, we do not know much beyond this. The process of change, and the context in which those changes take place, is often left unexplained. As a result, the explanatory

power and dynamism of the interpretive approach is weakened. This is why a focus on problematisations offers an important corrective. It allows us to further develop our understanding of dilemmas in two ways. First, problematisations draw our attention to the importance of everyday practices to explain how dilemmas unfold. This suggests that we can explain the process of change in interpretive schema not by simply juxtaposing different constellations of ideas or webs of belief, but how those beliefs play out in the habits, routines and everyday behaviour of actors. Second, problematisations develop the notion that dilemmas are structured in a context of power relations. By this, it suggests that we can explain why some aspects of traditions may change and others resist modification through the very way that a dilemma is structured.

Taken together, we can say that dilemmas unfold when diverse beliefs, practices and traditions meet, connect, intersect, bump or even crash into one another. It is the moment of intersection that is mediated by everyday practices and power relations when a dilemma emerges. These notions are not sufficiently developed or articulated in Bevir and Rhodes' empirical work, nor do the authors offer an alternative explanation for how dilemmas play out. While this had been an explanatory weakness in interpretive political science, insights from Michel Foucault's concept of problematisation offer useful interventions to strengthen the interpretive framework. How situated agents negotiate dilemmas and problems tells interpretive scholars a lot: by setting priorities, their values and their beliefs; by making decisions, their extent and interpretation of power. Crucially, we can analyse these issues through Bevir and Rhodes' existing interpretive approach. Analytically, their concepts of beliefs, practices, traditions, narratives and dilemmas remain as pertinent as ever; methodologically, their techniques (especially participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews) focus on everyday practices and the dilemmas that situated agents face. Importantly, analysis must centralise everyday practices and heighten the constitutive role that power plays examining how dilemmas *unfold*. When asking why dilemmas emerge, we must point towards the practices of everyday life and questions that those practices pose for situated agents as they navigate their social and political world. When asking how dilemmas develop and how they are resolved, we can look towards the agenda that a problematisation has set, the power relations between groups and individuals, and the nature of the conflicts between ideas, beliefs, practices and traditions.

The above discussion has a wider implication for our understanding of politics and the political terrain. In focusing on the importance of the *contest* or *clash* of ideas, and how this affects established webs of belief and everyday practices, we can say that a moment of a dilemma is a moment of politics. As Alan Finlayson (2007: p.552, emphasis added) suggests:

> If we begin with a clear and distinct concept of politics as the 'arena' within which we see expressed the *irreducible and contested* plurality of public life, the *ineradicable contestation* of differing world-views, then it is clear that what is distinct in politics is not the presence of beliefs but the presence of beliefs in *contradiction* with each other, not decisions about courses of action but of *dispute* over decisions and courses of action.

Such a definition of politics was noted in section 1.2, and chimes well with an anti-foundationalist philosophy. In taking interpretation seriously, it suggests that all established practices and webs of belief are historically contingent. Everyday practices create a sense of order by disguising or concealing potential conflicts, political differences and social tensions. When those practices are questioned – through dilemmas – it questions how society should be ordered, preserved or changed. As a consequence, contestation must be intimately and inextricably linked to politics and political action. Politics is not about the resolution of a conflict, the settlement of a dispute, or the outcome of a policy. Rather, it describes the process of contestation. Dilemmas begin the process of contestation and politicisation; their resolution depoliticises an issue. This occurs precisely through everyday practices and power relations discussed earlier. This is intuitive to how we understand democratic politics. Most democratic political systems are premised on the idea that politicians must compete for office through elections. Democracies offer a conflictual space where people can offer contrasting visions for social and political order, where people can disagree about means and ends (and even the meaning of the means and ends). Without this space, whether it is played out in the House of Commons chamber between government and opposition or on the sofas of breakfast news programmes, political action and reaction would be reduced to technocratic problem-solving. In focusing on dilemmas, we focus directly on the drama of politics. This reintroduces a sense of dynamism that had arguably been removed from Bevir and Rhodes' empirical work, a criticism noted earlier in this article. As such, a focus on dilemmas is a focus on the central dynamics of what we conceive as political.

To ground the implications of this article's approach in less abstract terms, let us return to previously cited examples, specifically governance practices in *The State as Cultural Practice* (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010: pp.136-55). The authors summarise three different stories to explain how different policy actors have dealt with the dilemma of fragmented service delivery following reforms to the state in the 1980s and 1990s: first, the centralisation story, i.e. attempts by Tony Blair to create a prime minister's department; second, the management story, i.e. attempts to improve public sector management; and third, the governance story, i.e. power dependencies within the core executive. The authors make use of beliefs and traditions of key actors to tell these stories. However, this does not explain where these stories come from, to whom they exert appeal, or how they link to each other. It is here where the insights from this article could play a decisive role. In making dilemmas the prism through which to conduct analysis, it would develop the stories differently. First, it would stress the effect of everyday practices of a range of different policy actors, all of whom push and pull service delivery in different directions. It is these everyday practices (informed by beliefs) that ultimately run into dead ends or problems that requires institutional change. Second, it would stress how the dilemmas is framed by different actors in order to examine where different narratives come from, whether it is the need for centralisation or a preference for further new public management tools. And third, it would stress the power relations between different actors to explore which of the different narratives exerts more or less persuasive appeal. All three elements were elided in *The State as Cultural Practice*, which, if taken into account, would radically re-frame their analysis towards one focused on practices, power and the clash of different beliefs and traditions that arises as a result. The focus of analysis would be on the battle of different narratives, including the personal relationships between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the practices of policy actors at different institutional levels in government, the importance of dominant traditions that structure those practices (e.g. continued belief in collective cabinet responsibility or parliamentary sovereignty), and so on. In focusing on the contest between beliefs, practices and traditions, the analysis would also highlight the intrinsically political nature of governance reforms as part of wider changes to the distribution of resources at an executive level.

This brief illustration seeks to show what is missing from Bevir and Rhodes' current analysis and what insights this article brings to bear on their research. Overall, the article argues for a much stronger focus on conflict, something that is inherently political, to see how beliefs, values and traditions interact with everyday practices and power relations.

This not only presents us with new, rich opportunities to use 'dilemmas' to understand political change within, as part of, and beyond institutional boundaries, but it also strengthens the explanatory value of adopting an interpretive outlook in political science.

4. Concluding remarks

This article opened with the important contribution that Bevir and Rhodes' work has made on British political science, and especially on the literature on executive governance. Their approach has – and will continue to – affect the way we study political phenomena more generally. And yet, there are chinks in the interpretive armoury that deserve further attention and discussion. This article has focused on dilemmas to further enhance their approach for the study of politics. This began, in the first section, by highlighting a noticeable shortcoming in how the concept of dilemma has been theorised and applied in interpretive political science. In particular, the concept is not central to analysis and so it has been difficult to explain political change and stability in Bevir and Rhodes' approach. While other scholars have looked at the concept of power, used rhetorical analysis or linked interpretive approaches to constructivist ones, this article sought to ameliorate those shortcomings in the second section through an articulation of the concept of 'problematisation'. This concept, as developed by Michel Foucault, centralises everyday practices and power relations as a focus for analysis. This is vital because it looks more closely at how situated agents' beliefs, practices and traditions interact with one another in direct and explicit response to dilemmas. This has wider ramifications, most notably highlighting the *political* nature of conflict and contestation, brought out in the third section. In making dilemmas central, it refocuses analysis explicitly on the politics of clashing beliefs and strengthens the explanatory value of the interpretive approach.

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